

# Queen For a Day

By Rita Mae Brown

In Xanadu did Kubla

Khan a stately pleasure dome decree. Don't bother booking passage, though: Xanadu is currently called

The Club and rests serenely on First Avenue between First and Second Streets in New York City. No woman had ever seen this foreign place until March 21, 1975, for The Club is a "bath house" serving a gay male clientele. However, on that date I, moustache firmly in place, curiosity raging, crossed the threshold into unknown territory. The adventure attracted me, but besides that I've been raised with the constantly repeated notion that women's sexuality and men's sexuality are absolutely different. By placing myself in an all-male situation where there is no intrusion of female sensibility I hoped to learn something about that sacred cow, sexual difference.

Like Dante, I too found my Virgil — Arthur, a dear male friend as high off the fun of it all as I was. Before I could crash The Club I had to contend with the minutiae of cultural sexual differentiation. My fingernails were all wrong. Had to cut them square across. My walk, though springy, just wasn't butch enough — so I practiced a manly gait and felt like John  
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## Queen

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Wayne reduced to five feet four inches. Arthur coached me in my transition, combed my hair, painted burning gum spirits under my nose, slapped on a dashing moustache, draped virile garments on my back and took me to dinner to rev up my courage.

When the waiter looked at us and asked, "What are you fellows having?" I fought the urge to reply, "A helluva good laugh." Feigning hoarseness I whispered my order. There's no way my voice could ever be confused with a man's. The whisper worked as he didn't bat an eye. Encouraged by this success I still worried about my breasts. At dinner I kept on the short Eisenhower jacket so I passed. But how would I ever get my clothes off in the locker room without anyone noticing?

As we stood in line next to each other to get into the baths I started sweating. Friday night is buddy night at The Club. Two men get in for \$5. At \$2.50 apiece that makes this the cheapest entertainment in town. Arthur, my buddy, twitched a bit himself the closer we got to the entrance window. Approximately 30 men waited patiently in line that evening. As we approached the booth, which resembles a ticket counter in a movie house, Arthur jumped forward, paid our money too hastily and signed his name on the clipboard. I signed mine "R. Brown," which was truthful enough. The door buzzed open and an attendant pointed us downstairs to the lockers.

White double lockers lined the narrow room. Seven or eight men crowded in the small space trying to get their clothes off. I took my shoes off first. What could be safer than feet? Then socks. Next I unzipped my pants. Wearing what our Elizabethan ancestors called a "cod piece" I felt secure about the tantalizing bulge there. As the men bluntly stared at my family jewels I whipped off the Eisenhower jacket. In a place like this your cock means everything. It's unlike lesbian gatherings where your face is most important, but it does have something in common with straight gatherings where men discuss the Mideast crisis with your left tit. Here, in the baths, the men don't even make a pretense of looking at your face as straight men on the make do. But how could I get my turtleneck off without my breasts flashing like a Maidenform advertisement? Sweat rolled off my forehead trickling over the black moustache. Arthur, naked in an instant, caught the moment and called for me to come over where he was. I walked over and he said in a forced conversational tone, "Does your arm still hurt? Let me help you get that off." Good old Arthur! Anxious to hit the action all but one of the men in the locker room left. Two new ones barged in just as I pulled my turtleneck over my head. Arthur lept in front of me and threw a short little robe over my shoulders.

So that I wouldn't be the only human being among the hundreds in a robe, Arthur put one on too. As we left the locker room area, passing by a mosaic pool and sparkling showers, he took my hand, for the crowd was so dense we would have become separated.

Entering the brightly lit TV room I was aware of being looked at. Men look at each other differently than men look at women. The leer is gone, the thinly disguised hostility of the street vanishes. Here the eyes zoom to the crotch. As I was partially covered their glance next went directly to my eyes and since I didn't respond to the unspoken question the eyes turned off to the side or to another person. The transaction boils down to: curiosity, no-connection, disconnection.

The TV room is neutral territory, a sort of sexual DMZ. Good photographs of men cover the walls, comfortable chairs allow people to relax and compare the photographs with reality while sipping a beverage. You might find someone in the TV room but you don't begin sexual activity until you leave there. We threaded our way through as fast as we could because of the lights and because the room is next to the entrance door so there are attendants around.

Off the TV room winds an adult puzzle called the maze, covered with thick carpets. You have to feel your way around in its alleys, turns and twists. The Minotaur is alive and well in this update of the ancient Greek legend of hunter and hunted. Around the corner may be the bull of your dreams or one more dead end. In choice places a small ultraviolet spotlight strikes a painted figure on the wall. Men with false teeth are careful not to smile because the ultraviolet light makes their teeth look black. Bodies in front of you, bodies in back of

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you, groping, pushing, trying to get to the prize at the end of the puzzle, the orgy room. Standing at strategic locations in the maze, men waited for a partner attractive to them. If sex starts in this setting it's usually cocksucking or a hand job. A bed hid behind one turn. The two men on it attracted a small following as others watched. It isn't considered bad manners to watch others and for some men the fun is in being watched. The old taboo of sneaking away for sex doesn't have a chance in these plush surroundings. As you bump through the dim puzzle you get groped, but it's gentle compared to the kind of grabbing a woman gets on a subway.

At last the maze spills into a dark and unbelievable orgy room. A large square bed, about the size of four double beds placed together, dominates the room, with about four feet of space around it so men have a place from which to observe. The silence amazed me. Seventy-five to one hundred men packed into that room, seven of them on the bed and not one word was spoken. Heavy breathing, sucking and a few timid moans were the only noises. Everyone watched the bed where a black man assfucked a white man while another white held his balls waiting for the surge. One couple valiantly tried to pull off sixty-nine without choking each other to death. The two other men on the bed circled each other like wrestlers trying to get the proper hold.



Inching around the bed I felt like I was sliding by a picket fence — all the erect penises behind me were hitting me in the small of my back. People reach for your genitals as you pass. My first response was to turn around and smash the offender's face in. I had to keep reminding myself, like a mantra chant, that these men thought I was a man and being a man is much safer than being a woman.

One huge fellow with a potbelly embraced me as I nudged him to get by. Another man quickly enclosed me from behind. Fighting off my instinctive violent response I relaxed, then hugged the man in return whispering, "Thank you but I've been here for an hour and I'm tired." He released me instantly. As we filtered through the orgy room I had to disengage every two steps. The easiness of refusal is incredible. In heterosexual life and lesbian life a first refusal never sinks in. Men and to a lesser extent, gay women, are geared to pursue you. Women, despite the "sexual revolution," demand an affirmation of your desire/affection, hence pursuit. How long this affirmation takes depends on the woman — hours, days, weeks, months. Since sex as a bargaining tool is the only thing most women control, they have to make you come to terms or they lose their market value. In the baths there was no pursuit and the reason was quite simple. Men have nothing to lose through sexual activity. If you say "no" it means "no," that's all, and that simple "no" also protects fragile egos. Sex isn't a weapon here, it's a release. There's no need to make anyone psychologically pay for your favors. Everyone pays to get in here to fuck, pure and simple.

The pressure to perform is diminished in this room because it is the ultimate anonymity. While everyone goes into the orgy room at one time or another in his sexual career, I couldn't help but think this room was the refuge for the unattractive, the insecure and the guilty. Here you risk the least and in merging with the crowd can lose yourself in the totality of genital sex.

From the orgy room we climbed the stairs to the cubicles, small rooms where men wait for a connection. Nerves tighten here. Belying their tension, they stroll up and down the two floors of corridors brazenly checking out the men on the beds. If a man lies on his stomach, a tube of KY, sterile lubricant, beside him, it means he wants to be assfucked. If he lies on his back, legs wide apart, he wants oral sex or possibly he'll fuck you. People stare into the rooms and then move on. As I prowled the corridors looking at the display I was struck again by the silence and by the fact that everyone plays with himself trying to get it up so it looks larger. Sex is deadly serious.

One bear of a man, probably not attractive to the other men, lay in a room desperately seeking his connection. Possibly in his mid-thirties, blue-eyed, he looked like a burly carpenter or strong dock-worker. Pausing in his doorway overlong I felt his anxiety increase. Without thinking about what it meant I smiled, wanting to reassure him. He smiled back as though some awful dragon had been slain and invited me in.

"I really like the way you look," I said, "but I've had it for the night." I waited for the classic line from him, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" Again, I didn't reckon with a man's fear of not being manly. Of course he wouldn't call

attention to my voice because who knows what I'd say to rip his balls off? He nodded his head and leaned forward to shake my hand, the traditional male response of good intentions.

Since class peels off with clothing you might think a democracy of nakedness and need would develop. But here in the cubes a new hierarchy took place among these lawyers, artists, grocery clerks, stockbrokers, movement activists, professors and cab drivers. Rank now came through size of penis, condition of body and age. The pretty young thing reigns, a sexual prima donna. Experience, intellect, talent, compassion mean nothing. Since you don't converse with your partner until after orgasm, if you talk at all, the irrationality of the flesh commands. Here the great American principle of competition and performance keep those on the make hungry, frightened and slightly savage. If you're old or potbellied or with a tiny penis you face blatant though silent humiliation.

At the end of one corridor was another orgy room composed of bunk beds slapped against the walls. As there was more light than in the downstairs orgy room, looks were more important. I saw a guy looking over his shoulder for Prince Charming while being blown. When a more attractive man meandered by he left the man sucking him and started working on the beauty.

Amid all this one-dimensional sexual activity people still look for the "right one." It's romanticism in a mechanical setting, with a heavy load of ego. Each man wants a partner worthy of him even if it's for a hand job. Since erection is the whole show, some men will hold their come if they're being worked on in one part of the baths and go to another part to see if there's someone better to shoot for. Another reason they

hold back is because if a man comes first he's got to keep working on the other guy, and that can become a colossal bore. In the orgy room you can leave someone, but in the cubicles there's more responsibility to your partner. The pressure of controlling your erection and orgasm adds to the sense of tension already existing here.

The steam bath and sauna were the only places remaining after the cubicles. Descending a narrow staircase busy with traffic we checked into the sauna first. The heat didn't wilt intense sexual activity. The steam baths proved even busier. The hissing of the steam, the mist and sweat provoked hot sex. My moustache drooped dangerously. By now my own frustration hit a peak, partly because I love steam baths and partly because I was tired of the deception. I wanted to take off my clothes. Under the moustache I was grand, old, glorious me, but whatever slender bond these men felt for me as a male would have been shattered if I revealed myself as a woman. I began to get angry that a woman would freak out some of these men. Their sexuality was their business. All I wanted to do was remove my



robe, the cod piece, the moustache and feel the sensual pleasure of heat and nakedness. But naked I would become frightening to some of these men. Their sexuality depended on my absence. Men are terrified of being women; they don't want to identify with us in any way — and gay men are no exception. We still aren't people to them.

At 1:30 am, after three-and-a-half hours, we left the baths. Triumph! I felt as though I had stowed away on the Queen Mary. But I still had a question: is this fuck palace the ultimate conclusion of sexist logic or is it erotic freedom? Perhaps the answer varies with each man who frequents The Club. Some men go to enjoy themselves and that's

all there is to it. For other men the baths become central to their existence. Adventure, thrills, acceptance narrows down to a few inches of cock attached to strange and therefore wonderful men. In anonymity each man can be Minotaur or victim.

To a woman anonymity is currently undesirable and frightening. Rape is often anonymous. Women can't trust men sexually, in an anonymous situation, the way men can trust each other. Some men do need a ballet of submission or conquest for their sexual adventure, both here in the baths and out in the heterosexual world, but I don't. To those of us forced to live beneath our abilities politically, sexually, socially, artistically and economically, sexual submission carries no hidden shudder of delight.

The men in the baths can walk out on the streets and reclaim all the privileges of maleness unless they are courageous enough to come out publicly and identify themselves as homosexuals. I walked out of the baths as I walk out anywhere, a woman. Although gay men are oppressed they have the baths as a retreat, an outlet, a fantasy farm. I have no such sexual/social outlet.

Women build no Xanadus because we are oppressed in a different way than the homosexual male. Not only do we lack the money but we lack the concept. Despite changing attitudes toward sex we can't create our version of the baths because, for most of us, sex for the sake of sex is still wrong — whether you are a heterosexual woman or a lesbian. Cigarette manufacturers tell us we've come a long way, sociologists write books about our sexual liberation, yet we build no stately pleasure dome to enjoy this so-called liberation. Sex still calls up awesome emotions, the old tyrannies of romance. We scramble to in-

places where we have relief, refuge, release. Xanadu is not a lurid dream, it's the desire of a woman to have options. Like men we should have choices: deep long-term relationships, the baths, short-term affairs. And those choices are not mutually exclusive.

Going to The Club taught me more about women's sexuality than it did about men's sexuality. And it taught me about myself. Like all human growth, sexual growth is ongoing. Technical sexual knowledge has limits, but sex as an integrated part of your whole life never stops unless you stop. I went to modern-day Xanadu to put myself in sexually alien territory, but I say that underneath all the posturing, the egos and the fears, those men weren't very different from heterosexual men or from women. The need is the same: sexual release. The deeper need, human contact, love, exists also. Men simply have more ways to mask that love need than women do. The real lesson for me was that there were moments in this strangest of places when I forgot to be different. ■

vest sex with love and we call men dogs because they've been taught to separate the two. If a woman manages to distinguish between sex and love and her needs for both she's "fast," as grandma used to say, whether she is straight or gay.

So I return to the question rattling in my mind ever since I peeled off my moustache. Sexism or erotic freedom depends on the person and yes, I do want a Xanadu. I want the option of random sex with no emotional commitment when I need sheer physical relief: erotic freedom. Our Xanadu would be less competitive than the gay men's baths, more laughter would ring in the sauna and you'd touch not only to fuck but just to touch. It is in our interest to build